It's Junior Johnson Country

Piedmont Region of North Carolina: Headwaters of American Stock Car Racing

BY SHAV GLICK
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WILKES COUNTY, N.C.—Beneath thick stands of Carolina pine, past the sheds where the coon dogs howl, a brook tumbles out of the Brushy Mountains bringing a refreshing coolness to the meadows of Ingle Hollow.

The brook is nameless.

"It's jest a little ol' stream," says the owner of the meadows. "Don't recall its ever havin' a name or nuthin'."

The brook deserves better. It and hundreds of other rivulets draining the Piedmont region of North Carolina should have historical markers that read:

"Here Lie the Headwaters of American Stock Car Racing."

For it was the water from these streams that went into the stills that made the whiskey that made the money to buy the cars that carried the whiskey. And it was the cars that carried the whiskey that the Good Ol' Boys raced Sundays in vacant fields that caused Bill France to build his big ovals where the cars could race in front of paying people that made millionaires out of fearless Carolina boys from funny-sounding hamlets like Randleman, Timmonsville, Spartanburg and Ellerbe.

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One stream in particular—the one that forms Ingle Hollow in northwestern North Carolina—is special. It's a sort of link between the shadowy bootleg beginnings of stock car racing in the 1950s and the multimillion-dollar industry of today.

To reach it you take route 421 out of Winston-Salem west toward North Wilkesboro, turn off a narrow, two-lane road that drops through hemlock and spruce and dogwood, past chicken hutches and Pardue's Grocery until you make a turn in the road and see a stately two-level brick house, its driveway defined by a neat brick fence.

The mailbox identifies the resident: Junior Johnson.

Maps call it the Piedmont. Or Wilkes County. The mailing address is Ronda, N.C. But to the folks from miles around it's Junior Johnson Country.

"I'll tell you, that stream's made as much as any stream in the world," says Johnson, a second-generation bootlegger turned race car driver turned race car owner and builder. "That's the secret right there, runnin' clear and nice like that. That stream's responsible for all this." He waved his hand toward the house, the racing complex where he can build a race car for Cale Yarborough from the floor up without leaving the premises, and the buildings where 92,000 fryers are being fattened for sale.

JUNIOR AND 'THE BOSS'—Junior Johnson holds pride of Johnson household named Cricket. Last year, Cricket was dognapped and Johnson paid $1,000 in ransom.
Photo by Harold Hogan

It was along the winding roads beside the creek that Johnson perfected his famous "bootleg turn" to avoid roadblocks thrown up by alcohol tax agents, better known as "revenoors." Johnson, rolling along a country lane at 80 m.p.h. with a load of half-gallon fruit jars filled with white lightning, would jam his gear into second, cock the wheels, stomp on the accelerator and spin the car 180 degrees. He'd be off in the opposite direction before the agents got the dust out of their eyes.

Junior Johnson builds and owns the cars Yarborough drove to the Winston Cup championship the past two years in NASCAR, the most successful racing body in the world. He is also the crew chief, engine man and boss of the operation. When Yarborough pits for a tire change—one of the most critical moments in a stock car race—Johnson mans the jack.

"Ain't nuthin' too small to do right," he says, "and ain't no use havin' somebody else flangin' the

Please Turn to Page 14, Col. 1

Visit to Junior Johnson Country

Continued from First Page

jack if'n I can do it better." Johnson can put the jack under the left side of the car and, when the tires are changed, can fling it around the back of the car like he was casting for trout and bring it down in perfect position on the right side.

In a banquet hall-size room loaded with trophies in the Johnson home, one of the most-prized is for being Best Jack Man on NASCAR's All American Crew.

A large man, who obviously enjoys too much of his wife Flossie's home cooking, Junior Johnson talks with a slow drawl, almost cautiously, in the storied manner of backwoodsmen, and so softly his sharp wit is sometimes lost on the wind. Wary of strangers ("You can't never tell what one of them tax fellas is gonna look like next"), Johnson rarely talks of his early days, when he drove his daddy's car on bootleg runs. When he does, though, he talks proudly.

"The trouble with talking with someone who's not from around here, it's hard to get them to know that bootleggin' was a way of life. It wasn't as if we's doin' something wrong. It was do it or starve. There's no harder work in the world than makin' whiskey and I don't mind sayin' my daddy made the best likker in these here parts."

Johnson is proud he was never caught runnin' whiskey. He did spend some time in the federal penitentiary, but he

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was caught at the still—not on the road. Stories of Junior's deeds are legend.

There was the time he came haulin' down the road after dark heading for an intersection where revenue agents hung out in a coffee shop.

"I'd cut my lights and if I didn't see any lights coming on the side road I'd take 'er up to about a hundred and roar right by the cafe. By the time the agents got to their cars I's halfway to Winston-Salem. Later that night I'd be a comin' back through there and I'd stop for coffee. I'd walk in and grin at the agents and they'd say, 'Was that you came through here a couple of hours ago, Junior?' I'd laugh and say, 'Yeah, and if you stick around I'll be back through again.' Never did get caught haulin' the goods."

In Johnson's competitive days he was known as the "Racing Chicken Farmer" because (1) he was sponsored by Holly Farms of neighboring Wilkesboro, world's largest processor of chickens, and (2) he helped raise the chickens Holly Farms sold. Today Johnson raises 92,000 chickens from chicks to full-size ready-to-eat fryers in automated coops tended by only one man. Every eight to nine weeks Holly Farms collects the grown chickens and brings in 92,000 chicks.

How he became a chicken farmer is another story, perhaps apocryphal, perhaps true, but definitely in keeping with the Johnson legend.

During a sugar shortage Junior was searching for some of the stuff to keep his stills operating. He came across a fellow who said he could deliver 20,000 pounds.

"Twenty thousand pounds," said Junior. "Where you get all that?"

"Never mind where I got it. I can get anything you want."

"Yeah, what else you got?"

"How about 100,000 baby chicks?"

Confronted with the tale, he just grins and allows as how "folks tell lots of stories about me, some's true and some jest sounds true." No denial. No acknowledgment. That's how legends grow.

Johnson also does grading work for the state.

"Thet was kinda like my racin' operation, it jest growed," says Junior. "When I decided to build a house, me and Flossie picked this site full of big pines. There had to be a whole bunch of grading so instead of hirin' it done I bought myself some equipment cause I'd spend that much anyway havin' it done. After I got the house done I jest kept it all and expanded some and found myself in the grading business."

Overlooked sometimes in the Johnson mystique is how great a driver he was. When he retired in 1966 he had 50 Grand National wins. Only Richard Petty, David Pearson and Lee Petty have more. But the remarkable fact is that Junior quit at only 34. Nearly all of today's top drivers—Petty, Pearson, Benny Parsons, Bobby and Donnie Allison, Buddy Baxer—are well past 34.

It was in the Daytona 500 of 1960 that Johnson discovered the technique of "drafting" a faster car, a maneuver that revolutionized racing tactics. Driving a 1959 Chevrolet, he noticed in practice that by following close behind a car he could be pulled along at half-throttle by its suction. The front car was doing the work and Johnson was getting almost a free ride. He did this in the race, saving his underpowered engine for the final dash while getting a "tow" from the more powerful cars. He won.

Although Johnson was a product of the two-fisted, hard-driving era of swashbuckling drivers like Curtis Turner, Fireball Roberts, Little Joe Weatherly and Tim and Fonty Flock, he unhesitatingly tabs today's driver as better. Or perhaps it should be today's driver-car combination.

"Drivers today are more tied up in their cars, more sensitive to the way they run. In other words they're more interested in what you're doing to them and they stay closer to their cars. Course, today's cars can cost you sixty thousand for a good one. When I was drivin' you could get a real competitive ride for four or five thousand. I had cars that won that didn't have more than that in 'em."

Junior gave up bootlegging and racing about the same time, for different reasons.

Racing: "I made him quit," says Flossie. "I still worry though every time he gets mad with one of his drivers. He tells 'em if they don't do what he wants he'll take that car out and show 'em how it's supposed to be done. He could, too. I worry some, too, when I read about David (Pearson) winning another race. You know he's older'n Junior if'n he told the truth about when he was born."

Pearson is listed in the NASCAR Guide as 43.

Bootlegging: "They put a five-thousand-dollar bounty on me," says Junior. "Now folks around these here parts are mighty loyal but they also get hungry and five thousand dollars would be awful tempting to some folks. I decided I'd better quit before someone tapped me."

Carolina liquor stores are stocked with the same brands you can buy anywhere else but bootlegging is still a way of life here. While Johnson was talking racing with a reporter in his garage, a friend dropped in and took Junior aside.

"Ol' boy got picked up hauling white lightning while we's down at Daytona," Johnson explained later. "Wanted to know if I knew a good lawyer. Law's tough these days. Year and a day if you get caught."

His racing days over, Johnson turned to building cars

Please Turn to Page 15, Col. 1

LAND OF FAST CARS, GOOD LIKKER

Continued from 14th Page

and racing them with hired drivers.

"I'd started workin' on my own cars when I was driving. Did most of my work up at Holly Farms (about 15 miles away) until I got to the point where I needed another facility and I decided to put it out behind the house."

Johnson's garage complex—with individual rooms for fabricating, chassis engineering, body work, engines, maintenance, painting, etc.—is not visible from the meandering road to the house. It's kind of hidden, like a still, out back among the pines. Right next to the stream, *that* stream, that flows through Ingle Hollow.

Johnson: "The original building used to be from over yonder where that thermometer's on the wall to where you're standing (about 12 feet square). That's all there was to it. That's where I worked on the cars, motors, everything.

"First thing I did was tack on a room to work on the motors. I had all my machine work done by somebody else but I did the assembly work here. Next thing was doing the machine work myself, so I had to build a room to run my engines. Once I got my jigs set up to machine my own stuff, I started selling extra parts to other guys. First thing you know I had myself a parts business. Had to build a building down by the road to keep customers from running all over my place."

Johnson sells just about everything for a Grand National car—wheels, headers, rear ends, valve covers, aluminum pulleys, sparkplug wires, you name it—over the counter.

Engine-building is expensive.

"Figure it takes about 300 man hours to get one ready to race. If we's gonna sell one it'd hafta cost about twelve thousand. That wouldn't even be a profit. Nuthin' comes cheap.

When the engine is together it goes on Johnson's dynamometer.

"You can sit right here with these dials and run it under

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race conditions. If it lives here it's definitely going to last on the race track. We really wring 'em out."

Many in the racing fraternity believe it is Johnson's special touch with eingines that enables him to field winning cars for Yarborough—and before him for Bobby Isaac, Darel Dieringer, Lee Roy Yarbrough, Charlie Glotzbach and Bobby Allison.

"Here's a guy with about a fifth-grade education and engineers at General Motors come down here and talk to him about what's wrong with their engines, or how to make 'em better," said Ralph Seagraves, head of the Winston Cup racing program. "One day they were all gathered around Junior's dyno and all those lights were on and Junior told those engineers, 'You'd better stand back, it's gonna blow in a minute.' In a minute it blew all to hell. One of the guys from Detroit said, 'Now how in hell did you know that?' Junior didn't even look up. Just said, 'Sound changed.'"

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Three generations of Johnsons have been reared in Wilkes County. Robert Glenn Johnson Sr. was born just a dogleg from where Junior and Flossie live today with Junior's invalid sister, the pretty Annie Mae.

"The old family home was beyond that patch of pine," said Junior, pointing across the stream to the other side of Ingle Hollow. "Right there's where I was raised. And my daddy, too. The old white frame house is torn down now and a new brick one built in its place. I got a first cousin lives in my uncle's old place back up the holler a bit. If you don't keep somebody living in an old place it'll jest fall down.

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The Johnsons have no children, but just about all the kids hereabouts might as well be theirs. On all but his cross-country trips to Riverside and Ontario, Junior loads his trucks with cars, equipment—and neighborhood children—and drives off to the races.

Trophies for winning races as a driver, car owner and mechanic, for coon hunting—and mementos from the motion picture "Last American Hero" about his life—fill the family trophy room. The biggest, about eight feet tall, was made by children from a nearby elementary school. "They had a Junior Johnson Day and every class had something about Junior," said Flossie. "I tell you I was laughin' and cryin' all day long."

Nearly all the food eaten on the Johnson compound is homegrown. There is enough meat hanging in Junior's meat locker to stock a butcher shop. One day he bought a bacon slicer and had so much fun playing with it he and Flossie sliced enough meat to take some to all their friends.

"Wasn't but a couple days before they were callin' back and askin' if we had any more of that bacon," Junior said with a grin. "If I'da had I'da cut it up in the first place."

When Junior's not fixing an engine, going to a race, feeding the chickens, slicing bacon or grading his property, he's most likely out coon hunting.

"We got about 15 coon dogs. Keep 'em right down here by the stream. See that one over there? Got offered $3,000 for him 'while back. I don't get out as much as I'd like but we like the dogs to run every night if they can. There's lotsa fellows in these parts can't afford their own dogs but likes to hunt so we let 'em borrow ours. They does us a favor by runnin' the dogs and thesselves a favor, too."

The pride of the Johnson household is a perky-eared dog named Cricket. Last year Cricket was dognapped out of Johnson's car and Junior posted—and paid—a $1,000 reward for his return.

"He's jest a little old mutt (pronounced muh-ut) but he's the boss," said Junior.

If so, he's boss of a million-dollar racing operation in a remote corner of the Carolinas that "jest growed" from a brook in Ingle Hollow where Cricket goes to have a cool drink every day.